Assessing interest group politics in EU governance

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Introductions

I. Assessing Interest Group Politics in EU Governance

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The literature on interest group politics in the European Union has come of age. The last ten years we have seen a remarkable shift from a literature consisting of mainly empirics driven studies that remained detached from sophisticated conceptual reflection, to a firmly theory-informed field of empirical political science. The study of EU interest group politics has become more professionalised, as researchers have moved away from studies that had their merits on their own but often suffered from theoretical grandstanding or idiosyncratic topics and/or sui generis explanations, to studies that link theoretical and conceptual development with sound empirical hypothesis testing.[1] The reason for this transformation is to be sought in changes in the discipline of political science and adjacent disciplines, but certainly just as well in the transformation of European

[1] I remember but too well going to my PhD supervisor Daniel Verdier during my first year of research in 1997, telling him hesitantly that I had failed to spot *The* literature on EU interest representation. Was his reaction: "Of course you didn't find any! Because there *IS* no such literature!" Fortunately, Daniel's hyperbolic quip is no longer right.

politics with its decline of electoral party politics and the migration of the 'authoritative allocation of values' into policy networks and negotiation systems in which interest groups and civil society organisations assume prominent positions.

As a result of this development, researchers in the field of interest group politics have found it rewarding to exchange their ideas, draft papers, and/or finished research projects in the framework of the Connex Research Group 'Civil society and interest representation in EU-governance'. In this introduction, I select some of the findings on biased representation and influence, add some reflections coming out of discussions within the research group, and draw out lines for future research. I mostly rely on two special issues of academic journals that came about in the framework of Connex workshops on interest group politics. The first one is small in scope and size but youthfully immodest in ambition: a special issue of *Journal of Public Policy* (JPP) on 'Interest group influence in Europe and the United States' (Dür and De Bièvre 2007). The second one is more encompassing in depth and breadth of issues covered, as well as the product of more seasoned scholars: a special issue of *West European Politics* (WEP) entitled 'Interest group politics in Europe. Lessons from EU Studies and Comparative Politics', edited by Jan Beyers, Rainer Eising, and William Maloney.

Normativity and bias in interest group politics research

A first thought that comes to mind when overviewing the activities of this diverse group of scholars is their unease with the term 'civil society'. Policy practitioners often use the term civil society for NGOs, diffuse or public interests, and social movement organisations in a ameliorative sense, thereby

attributing a pejorative connotation to terms such as business interests, employers organisations, and special interest organisations (for a more thorough discussion, see Beyers, Eising and Maloney, forthcoming). In research however, such a normatively laden word usage reveals itself as inhibiting, rather than stimulating comparative research. For instance, in which box of the dichotomy would we have to place trade unions? Are they civil society organisations in the 'good' sense? Or are they special interest group organisations in as far as in wage negotiations they represent members at the detriment of non-members and the unemployed? Although practitioners engaged in political conflict may well benefit from bracketing their interlocutors in terms of bad and good guys, one of the golden rules of categorisation in research is to avoid a priori value judgements regarding particular categories, but rather to make the attribution of value judgements dependent on the research question at hand. But even if we have adopted a particular working definition and think we have defined concepts like civil society organisations, interest groups, or social movements, words keep their normatively laden touch. Closeness to usage by public actors, however, is likely to make research uncritical and therefore less useful for practitioners and academic observers alike.

Due to the positive connotation that the term civil society conjures up, many scholars have deliberately avoided using it. They have surely not done so in order to remove the question of normativity from the agenda. On the contrary, it remains central to the research endeavour in its importance for the formulation of research questions. One of the most prominent motivations to do research on interest groups is the question of bias – bias in representation, as well as bias in influence on policy outcomes. We ascribe meaning to it by establishing a measuring rod of what we think *un*biased representation and *un*biased influence would look like. The trouble is that we

often do not know what such an ideal Platonic polity, and set of policies, would be. In order to escape this essentialist trap, we look for reference points in other political systems. We compare political systems with *more* bias to those with *less* bias. We do not compare a system *with* bias to one *without* bias, as we are bound to view any political system as *some type of* mobilisation of bias (Schattschneider 1960).

The assumption that access and inclusion can be taken as proxies for groups' likely impact on policy outcomes, is not validated in empirical research on European trade policy. In this policy field, NGOs have recently gained access to policy-makers, but have largely failed to shift policy outcomes in their favour. This does not result from an overwhelming presence of focused producer interests or their lack of expert knowledge, but may well be explained by their lack of resources to diminish or enhance the chances of political actors to be re-elected or re-appointed (Dür and De Bièvre 2007b).

With respect to the EU, Beyers, Eising and Maloney point out that even the comparison of relative values of bias is tricky, since some types of interest groups may not feel the need to mobilise on the European level as EU competencies in particular policy fields may be weak or non-existent (Beyers, Eising and Maloney 2008). And as the contribution by William Maloney to this volume shows, we might find some forms of bias actually very desirable in cases where these organisations defend interests of people that out of themselves will hardly mobilise, or in the case of the better informed, because they tend be more tolerant. In sum, research on bias is likely to stay on the agenda in a prominent way, especially if we try and tackle the tricky issue of sampling the relevant population of individuals, interests, and organisations.

Stages in the policy process and EU – US comparisons

There seems large agreement among the researchers in the Connex workshops that the segmentation of the policy cycle is a very useful antidote to vague and unfalsifiable generalisations about interest group politics. In a remarkable contribution to the WEP special issue, Lowery, Poppelaars and Berkhout discuss the advantages of this approach extensively (Lowery, Poppelaars and Berkhout 2008). They distinguish the following stages in what they call the influence production process: the mobilisation of individual organised interests, their interactions within interest systems, their influence activities, and their consequences for policy. They show how such a segmentation can encourage the development and testing of middle-range theories, be they on conditions for collective action, the development of strategies, the formation of networks or coalitions or the influence on policy outcomes, to name but a few of the dependent variables that research in the special issues has focused on.

While extolling the benefits of splitting the policy cycle into comparable units, Lowery et al. are far less upbeat about the merits and feasibility of EU – US comparisons. Surprisingly so, since they might just as well have concluded in a modestly optimistic way that, given the caveats, they have provided useful strategies to pursue this route in future research. Surprisingly also, since in the same issue the contribution by Baumgartner and Mahoney illustrates a convergence of perspectives on interest-group research in Europe and America (Mahoney and Baumgartner 2008). They discuss how studies have increasingly focussed on the impact of government structures on mobilisation, the locus of advocacy and interest group strategies on both sides of the Atlantic. And in a contribution to the JPP special issue Christine Mahoney

illustrates how such comparisons across different political systems can fulfil their promise of interesting results (Mahoney 2007).

Relevance and feasibility: what should we be studying?

A third striking point has been the difference in opinion about what constitutes the most relevant and feasible object of study in interest group politics. Some are sceptical about studying influence. Is influence not researchable enough and should we study participation and representation instead? Or should we restrict ourselves to interest group strategies for the same reason? Should we focus less on lobbying activities of organisations, since much of what organisations do is not lobbying but management of their organisational maintenance? The participation in consultations may be attractive for gathering information and expertise, for cultivating political networks, and for enhancing public visibility vis-à-vis key constituencies. Still others are sceptical about studying cleavages, since by doing so you risk reducing politics to conflict between rival groups about the allocation of resources, whereas conflict may not be pervasive in many sub-fields of the polity. A simple answer to these controversies would be that all possible strands have their merits and will merrily complement each other, but unfortunately, such a simple answer will not do. To take but one example, the introduction to the JPP special issue (reprinted in this volume) and the contribution of Andreas Dür to the WEP special issue show that there are many impediments to the study of influence, but there are also some ways to get around these in order to design a meaningful study on the impact on policy outcomes. Complementarities in the use of categories and differences in the research questions addressed will remain the key in advancing the literature on interest groups.

The perspective of future networking and collaboration

I believe it is fair to conclude that the numerous workshops within Connex have brought together people that would otherwise not have known each other's ways of thinking and writing about interest group politics. The intensive exchanges and discussions have opened windows and doors to new ways of looking and conceptualising, sharpened insight into enduring riddles, and laid the basis for future collaborative research. Planning is underway to maintain and intensify regular exchange in a more permanent network, and promote comparative and collaborative research on interest group politics in Europe in the near future.

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